

**Beyond**  
YOUTH CUSTODY

# **CUSTODY TO COMMUNITY**

## **HOW YOUNG PEOPLE COPE WITH RELEASE**

### **RESEARCH REPORT**



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

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## Executive summary

This report begins to address a gap in the knowledge about the way that young people experience the transition from custody back into the community. In particular, it highlights the stresses reported during a period of disorientation and reorientation immediately following release. The research team reanalysed thematically 59 transcripts that we have conducted with young people aged between 12 and 17 for studies on broader issues related to youth custody. Recommendations are produced in order to stimulate national and local debate on considering responses to the disorientation and reorientation during this period in order to allow for longer-term success in resettlement.

### Introduction

- Although studies have paid attention to the negative effects of custody for young people, and in particular how it can be a stressful experience, there has been a dearth of research looking at how young people experience their return to the community. Given that adults have been shown to be at high risk of self-harm and suicide during this period, this is an area that requires urgent examination for young people already typically vulnerable.
- The need to understand how young people experience the community phase of a custodial sentence is also increased because of recent policy emphasis on resettlement and a statutory licence period.
- Some emotional difficulties during the transition period immediately following release have been alluded to in previous studies. Similar problems have been mentioned consistently enough to warrant examination here by looking for patterns and themes in data drawn from a number of previous studies.

### Release as a period of reorientation

- Young people report a period of necessary reorientation immediately following release. While the length of this period varies, young people referred mostly to the early days and weeks. While some navigate this period relatively smoothly, there is a dominant theme of young people finding this period difficult to cope with.
- Typically, the disorientation after release is described generally as them feeling *strange and weird* – life is unsettling and destabilising at this point.
- The disorientation is made all the more difficult to cope with because it is often unanticipated by young people, having only framed their anticipated release in a positive light. It can come to them as a stress-inducing shock.

### Negative symptoms felt after release

- Stress and anxiety were prevalent themes running through young people's detailed descriptions of the effect of this disorientation. Symptoms included physical manifestations such as shaking and nausea, as well as emotional breakdown when children find that they cannot operate for some time upon release.
- Some young people react to the disorientation felt by becoming quiet and withdrawn. They may not want to talk to anyone or leave their home or bedroom. This can be exacerbated by a fear of getting back into trouble if they leave the house and being returned to custody. The outside may also feel unsafe, with the young person feeling scared of others.
- Young people also report physical tiredness after release. This may be another physical manifestation of stress, but young people generally put it down to feeling the effects of the change in pace and increased physical activity in the outside world.

### What was stressful about the transition process?

- The foremost aspect of the transition that young people highlight as stressful is simply their struggle to comprehend the complete and sudden change in their life regime, following the previous major life event of imprisonment. The children are overwhelmed, lost and confused.

- Another source of stress reported is the perception that, after the relatively sedentary regime in custody, everyone is rushing around madly. Furthermore, children can find it difficult to adapt from the structured and ordered nature of the custodial regime to a potentially chaotic home life.
- Young people are surprised to find that elements of their environment that were familiar and taken for granted before custody now seem unfamiliar. Seeing everything as new without a sense of normality is destabilising for them.
- This process of refamiliarisation is undermined by suddenly coming across elements of their home environment that have, indeed, changed while they were in custody. This destabilises them further and can cause confusion and anxiety.
- Interaction with people, even family and friends, can be problematic. There is a period of re-establishing and renegotiating relationships that have been interrupted by incarceration, as well as relearning communication skills. This can be even more difficult with peers of the opposite sex.
- The difficulties interacting with others can be made more stressful by the way that people can be particularly interested in hearing all about their time in custody. Indeed, there were examples of family and friends wanting to give young people extra attention during this orientation period.

## Conclusion – disorientation and reorientation

- Young people released from custody enter a period of disorientation following release, where the transition destabilises them. This requires the young people to undertake a process of reorientation in order to move towards successful resettlement and desistance. In the meantime, the period of the early days to weeks can be an overwhelmingly stressful experience. Children's related experiences are consistent with symptoms of adjustment disorders which carry increased risks of long-term psychiatric illnesses and suicide.
- The experiences of the young people here allow us to analyse the reorientation process in relation to three foci of sudden change in the transition:
  - Life regime, where a sudden change, faster pace of life and lack of structure, requires **readjustment** to the new lifestyle
  - Environment, where the familiar now seems unfamiliar and changes which have happened when in custody, require a **refamiliarisation** over time
  - People, where home interacting becomes difficult with interrupted relationships, particularly with the now unfamiliar opposite sex, and requires a **renegotiation** of relationships and redevelopment of interaction skills
- This process is made more difficult because: (1) children may not have developed strategies to cope with transitions, (2) this particular group have higher levels of need and vulnerabilities, (3) they are more likely to have to orient themselves around a chaotic home environment, (4) they are simultaneously trying to renegotiate a post-custody identity for themselves, and (5) research suggests that structural support such as stable accommodation, education, training, employment and financial stability on which to build their reorientation may well not be available by the time of release.
- In highlighting the phenomenon of disorientation after release, we raise questions for urgent policy and practice consideration, including the appropriateness of intensive early licence requirements, and of breach proceedings for failure to comply with such requirements.

## Recommendations

- Beyond the obvious preference to avoid sentencing or remanding to custody, the report concludes with specific recommendations for easing this orientation process. However, the first step is for policymakers and service providers to acknowledge the disorientation and anxieties arising after release and take this into account in resettlement planning and enforcement.

# 1 Introduction

Since the introduction of state custodial facilities for young people in England and Wales almost 200 years ago, pressure groups, inspections and researchers have highlighted the negative effects of incarceration (recent examples include Goldson, 2005; and Kennedy, 2013). In particular, attention has been drawn to how stressful the experience of being locked away can be for a child, isolated from family and friends in an artificial (and for some, dangerous) environment far removed from normal childhood (Dimond et al, 2001; Goldson, 2002; Lyon et al, 2000). Some studies have noted transition into custody is a period for vulnerability, when young people can feel particularly stressed and lonely (Hazel, 2007; Howard League, 2010). The emotional difficulties of prison life have, of course, come to the fore because of suicides and self-harm in prisons (Coles and Goldson, 2005; Edmunson and Coles, 2012; Inch et al, 1995).

However, there is a dearth of literature on how young people experience resettlement after prison, even though it is recognised that prison can exacerbate existing problems (Bateman and Hazel, 2013; Youth Justice Board, 2005). Given that research with adults has noted that ex-prisoners are extremely vulnerable to suicide (Howard League, 2002), and that the first two weeks following release from prison are associated with higher rates of drug-related mortality (Merrall et al, 2010), this is an area that needs to be explored further in relation to young people who are already typically vulnerable and may have a background of trauma (Wright and Liddle, 2014).

The way that young people experience and respond to the community phase following custody will become even more important for two reasons. The first is the extra emphasis that is being placed on resettlement by the government as part of their *Transforming Youth Justice* agenda, in which the importance of post-release support is noted. Second, young adults face a new compulsory supervision period of a minimum of a year after leaving custody, resulting in continued statutory responsibility for their resettlement. Clearly, support services need to be made aware of any patterns of distress that are likely to arise during the early part of that period and any indications of what might lay behind it.

Some emotional difficulties during the transition from custody to community have been alluded to in passing in some reports, but have not been fully examined or become a research focus in themselves, for example in the national evaluation of the Detention and Training Order (Hazel et al, 2002a). However, the authors of the current report have recognised that young people have mentioned, in various studies we have undertaken, that they have problems in immediately coming to terms with life outside prison. While not featuring as a major finding in any one of those studies – each of which had a broader focus – there is a clear pattern across the studies taken as a whole that justifies, and requires, further examination.

This report, undertaken as part of the work of *Beyond Youth Custody* to promote good resettlement practice, describes the findings that emerge from that examination. We revisited data from five studies undertaken by us over the 15-year period from 1998 to 2013, (see table 1, page 5).

Our analysis used data from qualitative in-depth interviews with young people aged between 12 and 17 (supplemented by a small number of interviews with some of their carers). The original interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The sampling technique used in all studies was purposive, intended to obtain a cross-section of ages, sexes and offences as appropriate to the study. In total, 59 transcripts from the different studies were analysed. Analysis was carried out thematically to illuminate the dominant themes in respondents' perceptions.

Where appropriate we have illustrated themes in the report by using direct quotations, allowing the voices of the young people involved to be heard. Where possible, we have used quotations from the same young people across different sections of the report in order to allow the reader to build up a more rounded picture of the problems and effects faced by those young people.

**Table 1: Studies from which data were analysed for this report**

	Study	No. of appropriate interviews examined
<b>1</b>	Evaluation of Medway Secure Training Centre (1998-2000) Involving Neal Hazel while at the Policy Research Bureau, funded by the Home Office (Hagell et al, 2000)	14
<b>2</b>	Assessment of the Detention and Training Order (2000-2002) Led by Neal Hazel while at the Policy Research Bureau, with Mark Liddle at Nacro, funded by the Youth Justice Board (Hazel et al, 2002a)	17 (plus 3 carers)
<b>3</b>	Young offenders' experiences of Criminal Justice (2000-2002) Led by Neal Hazel while at the Policy Research Bureau, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Hazel et al, 2002b)	10
<b>4</b>	Evaluation of RESET resettlement programme (2005-2007) Led by Neal Hazel at the University of Salford, with Mark Liddle at ARCS, funded by Rainer (Hazel et al, 2010)	15
<b>5</b>	Resettlement needs of girls in custody (2011-2013) Undertaken by Tim Bateman and colleagues at the University of Bedfordshire, funded by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust (Bateman, Melrose and Brodie, 2013)	3

## 2 Release as a period of reorientation

### The transition process

Some young people report that their release from custody was straightforward to deal with, particularly in comparison with the challenges of being sent away from home in the first place. They may describe things on the outside as being fairly similar to before, with the same home environment and support networks. Reflecting back on the period of release, it perhaps went as smoothly as possible and soon felt like they had never been away:

I reckon it was easy. I just come out and everything is the same, not the same but after the two days everything felt the same. It was like I had never gone to prison. *John, 17*

However, the two days referred to by John above, reveals that even when things go well, there is still a period of orientation that young people need to navigate. The initial period of release, however long that reorientation takes, involves a transition process for the young people, as children try to readjust to the outside world after incarceration. As we will see later, this process includes, among other things, reacclimatising to the space and pace of life in the community, and renegotiating relationships.

Overall, the young people we have interviewed present a picture of this period of orientation being difficult to cope with. There is some indication that those more likely to underline these problems are the most vulnerable children – younger girls and boys. And perhaps a failure to negotiate this transition process could be a contributing factor to why there is evidence that the younger a person is, the sooner they are likely to reoffend after release (Hazel and Liddle, 2012). Nevertheless, the challenges of this initial period have been themes revealed to some extent by children of both sexes and of all ages being released from the secure estate. While none of the interviews was with young adults, aged 18 years or older, there is no obvious reason to think that the experiences of this group would be markedly different.

### Unanticipated disorientation

The way that these challenges are experienced is often difficult to articulate, but certain words are used repeatedly and very consistently by young people describing how it was for them immediately following release. These include *mad*, *buzzing*, *strange* and *weird*.

These words point to a disorientation on release and signal the need for a process of reorientation as part of the transition from custody to community. Life is strange, and unsettling, to the young people. Although some, like John, may be equipped to cope well with the strangeness that faces them, and are able to readjust relatively smoothly, others, like Tony, find it more difficult to navigate:

Weird, it done my head in. *Tony, 14*

A further general theme is that the disorientation upon release is made all the more difficult to cope with because it is unanticipated by young people. They realise that leaving custody is a major event, but they do not anticipate the disorientation:

Big thing innit, just getting let out. And then I felt weird for a bit.... I couldn't speak. It was weird...I knew I'd be happy and everything, but I didn't know it was going to feel like that. *Ella, 17*

As the above quotation suggests, young people can frame the anticipated release in an entirely positive light, understandably excited about regaining their freedom and the possibilities of spending time with family and friends, and getting back to normal. Most have not considered that their time locked away may have consequences that might make the transition to the community a less positive experience than they expect.

Even if young people faced with leaving custody are aware that they may have to adjust to some extent, getting back to an outside routine or a sense of freedom, they can still be surprised by the extent of how weird the outside world feels to them:

I knew it was gonna be a bit weird but I didn't think...I dunno. I think it just hit me to be honest, I dunno. *Sasha, 17*

Indeed, the combination of disorientation and the lack of expectation is described as like a shock. This unexpected disorientation hits young people when they are released from custody. Ella's admission that she was unable to speak hints at how the process of returning to the community might, paradoxically, have negative connotations in terms of the child's well-being. The manner in which Ella, Sasha and others describe the negative effects of the transition is explored in the next section of this report. Here it is important to note a tension. The period immediately after release has been identified as a window of opportunity during which young people may be committed to giving up offending (Bateman, Hazel and Wright, 2013). The shock of leaving custody, however, if not addressed, might tend to undermine that commitment, thereby reducing the prospects for desistance. This tension might help to explain why reoffending, breach and return to custody are also particularly prevalent in the early period following transfer to the community. From a resettlement perspective, it highlights the importance of recognising that stress is frequently a concomitant of release and developing practice to take account of this phenomenon.



### 3 Negative symptoms felt after release

The experience of disorientation following release is often described in the kind of general terms outlined above, such as *weird* or *strange*. It is difficult to isolate particular ways in which this weirdness may be felt or what particular aspects of the experience trigger that disorientation. However, there are some specific types of negative effects that are repeatedly revealed by young people when considered across studies.

#### Overwhelming stress symptoms

The main narrative running through young people's descriptions of how they felt in the period after release from custody is that of stress. They describe feeling effects from release that would commonly be understood as serious symptoms of anxiety. These are not usually framed in medical terms by the young people, but fit closely with diagnostic symptoms consistent with the World Health Organisation's anxiety classifications, including *adjustment disorders* (World Health Organisation, 1992).

For example, young people describe symptoms that have manifested themselves **physically**:

When my mum came and picked me up from the prison, when I came out and I was sitting in the car, I felt sick. I was shaking cos I didn't know what to do and that. *Ella, 17*

Having got into her mother's car, the most normal of situations to anyone not having been locked away, Ella was overwhelmed by what faced her. The combination of the physical symptoms of shaking and nausea, together with confusion, suggest anxiety or even a panic attack.

These symptoms of anxiety can become too much for young people and they become low in mood, upset or break down **emotionally**. They find that they cannot cope with the strangeness of release and are unable to function in the outside world for at least a short period of time:

I couldn't handle it, like the first day I couldn't handle being out of prison. I just couldn't stop crying and felt depressed all the time. *Sasha, 17*

#### Quiet and withdrawn

An earlier quotation from Ella indicated that her anxiety resulted in her not being able to speak for a period after release. This is part of a wider pattern of young people reacting to the disorientation by becoming quiet and withdrawn, sometimes to the concern of their family and friends:

I came out and it was weird. I could hardly talk for about a week. *Ben, 17*

For some, this withdrawal may be a stress symptom, as suggested here. For others, it may be a lack of confidence in how to communicate in community settings (as described later). Thirdly, it may be a deliberate coping mechanism for dealing with the overwhelming nature of the situation – a withdrawal from the world or closing down. Certainly, the last of these explanations is implied by this quotation from the grandparent of another child, who described the initial period when her grandson did not speak and avoided going out:

He was very withdrawn when he first came out. He didn't want to go anywhere or anything. He is back [to himself] now. Yes, he is speaking now and he does go out with his friends. *Grandparent of male aged 16*

Either way, such agoraphobic symptoms of not wanting to leave their home are frequently associated with a process of withdrawal:

Just indoors with all my family and friends, I didn't go out. *Sasha, 17*

Young people describe being unprepared mentally to go out and face the world for a number of days or weeks following their return home. Accordingly, others have described how difficult emotionally they found

it to abide by Detention and Training Order licence requirements to attend sessions outside their home in the first few days after release. Ella reported that she did not leave her house for ten days after getting home:

*I just weren't ready to go out. I felt weird... I was scared of getting in trouble and getting taken back...As long as I was in the house, I wouldn't mind. Ella, 17*

For Ella, then, the stress of release was mixed with a fear of being sent back to custody. She reflected that the withdrawal was not just a reaction to her anxiety symptoms, but also a desire to remain in her place of safety, and avoid leaving which would risk being drawn into trouble and locked up again. So, she found the experience of release stressful, but not as scary as being sent back.

For some young people, not wanting to leave the house was related to a lack of confidence in how to deal with the outside world:

*I didn't really want to go out. I wasn't used to being there. I had to start again getting used to the area. Ben, 17*

As this quotation suggests, the young people became aware that the once familiar had become unfamiliar to them – their own neighbourhood felt alien. Their reorientation was a literal one within their geographical environment.

The outside may also feel unsafe. Withdrawal is thus a response to feeling scared and this is reinforced by what young people experience when they do venture outside, which can in some cases include symptoms of anxious paranoia:

*I was really scared when I am out. I was all scared cos I thought everyone was looking at me. I felt scared. I walked around town, and I thought everyone was just staring at me, but they weren't, it was just me. Peter, 17*

The kind of paranoid mistaken cognition experienced by Peter may be as a result of wider stress and disorientation, or it may be due to being unfamiliar with everyday social interaction after an artificial custodial environment. Either way, it would further worsen the stress for children in this period after custody. Fear as an inducer of stress is explored further in the next chapter.

## Physical tiredness

Some other physical symptoms experienced after release and reported by young people in studies may or may not be down to anxiety. For instance, they describe feeling tired when they get home. This might indeed be another physical manifestation of the stress indicated above, or just of the nervous energy expended during the anticipation and experience of release. However, the young people themselves tend to put it down to feeling the effects of the change in pace and increased physical activity in the outside world:

*I just used to get right tired, cos inside you used to like walk around there not doing much really. Gary, 14*

As above, respondents explain that they had become used to a constrained environment and a rigid regime that obviates the need for them to make decisions and tends to undermine their capacity for agency. The increased pace of life within the community and the new found freedom to exercise choice accordingly requires a process of readjustment. Some young people have also described how their limbs feel weaker for a short period after release:

*And walking as well, that was mad, walking. My legs felt like spaghetti. Martin, 16*

Again, it is unclear whether legs like spaghetti might be a symptom of stress or of the physical readjustment to the home environment and routine after custody. But either way, it is another negative effect felt after release that young people have to cope with as they attempt to resettle back into the community. The next section of the report explores in more detail what particular aspects of the experience of release might produce the physical and emotional reactions reported by the young people.

## 4 What was stressful about the transition process?

One might expect that release from custody would be a happy relief for young people – a time of celebration. Certainly, research has indicated that the moment of release is a point where children look forward positively and tend to be at their most confident of successful resettlement and desistance (Hazel et al, 2002a). Yet the previous section revealed that the reality of release can generate negative symptoms, including emotional and physical anxiety, withdrawal and tiredness. It is understandable that the period of transition would require a process of readjustment and reorientation, but what aspects of this process lead to the kinds of negative effects outlined above? This section explores features of the process that young people themselves have highlighted as difficult and stressful for them.

### Scared by the sudden change

First and foremost, young people indicate that the simple fact that there is such a complete change in their life is difficult for them to comprehend. They have just had a major life event, a period of imprisonment, followed by another major life event – being thrust back out into the environment. They have to get used to the realisation that imprisonment is over and they are free – and that often happens all of a sudden, without time out on temporary licence or any transition to a more open prison. As such, the suddenness can be scary:

*I came out and I was scared. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where to go. I kept sitting down. I was like seeing cars going past and I was like, "Can't believe I'm out". Jenny, 16*

The not knowing what to do mentioned by Jenny is a common refrain. This may be partly due to lacking the firm structure of a custodial schedule and regime, or it may be simply that they feel overwhelmed by the sudden change. Given the lack of clear planning for resettlement reported in research (Hazel and Liddle, 2012), it may also be that some of the disorientation is due to their uncertainty about support and the future in the near and longer term:

*Lost, I think I was. I didn't know where I was going to go or what. I just came out of there. It was like my life had just stopped and swung back round and kicked me. Martin, 16*

In any event, there is a feeling of being lost on release, as Martin describes it. The young people explain not knowing whether they are coming or going and feeling confused in a way that is understandably stressful:

*I walked into the shop, and I didn't know what I wanted. Peter, 17*

### Pace and lack of structure

This report has already related the tiredness after release reported by young people, which they explain as feeling the effects of a change in pace after the constraints of incarceration. Moreover, young people recount more generally feeling stressed at the pace of everyone and everything around them when they get out, from the speed of the car taking them home, to the rush that everyone seems to be in going about their daily lives:

*I came home and everything was faster, cos everything's slow down there [in custody]. You don't really do owt do you? So you come out and everyone's just rushing about as normal and... so it takes you a while to keep up and carry on. Gary, 14*

Young people note, like Gary, that this is in contrast to life inside where everything is slow and ordered, or where little is done. This contrast requires reorientation – it takes a while to catch up with the pace. It is understandable that this sudden change of pace could be frightening and stressful, especially given the amount of activity centred around them (including the often last minute resettlement arrangements). As Martin puts it, it seems like everyone is mad around them:

Everyone rushing about. Everyone is mad. You are used to sitting down all day. *Martin, 16*

The movement away from an ordered custodial regime is felt not only in the change of pace, but also in the change of structure. For some, after moving from a typically fairly chaotic life before custody, to extremely controlled management of time in custody, they are then transferred back out to that same lack of structure in their everyday lives – particularly if education, training or employment has not been fully organised by the time of release. They suddenly find that their very well-established sleeping patterns and eating patterns are disrupted:

Just my sleeping pattern. [In custody] I wake up in the morning and make the bed and then eat my breakfast for a certain time. But it's just getting back into a sleeping pattern. *Sean, 16*

This lack of structure may, in itself, be disorienting and may leave the young person feeling lost. They either need to learn to adapt to existing patterns in their home, find their own, or have no stable pattern which has implications for meeting external licence obligations. The difficulty with the middle option of finding their own structure is that the custodial experience can also reduce a young person's ability or confidence to act independently, at least in the short term. For instance, one young person recounted how he found himself asking his parents if he should change the television channel that he was watching, unable to make the decision himself.

### **The familiar is unfamiliar**

Another frightening element of the disorientation that children feel after release is that aspects of their life that were everyday and taken for granted before they were locked up no longer appear as such. Nothing seems ordinary or familiar and what was commonplace is now experienced by children as destabilising, stressful and shocking:

I dunno, I was shocked really...happy to get out, yeah... [but] yeah, it felt weird. Like seeing a bus and everything, it felt weird. *Sasha, 17*

As such, the young people find that nothing seems normal to them anymore, or at least the first time they encounter it during their reorientation process. With every journey or interaction seeming unfamiliar and without our taken for granted frames of reference, young people may feel safer to withdraw as outlined in the section above. As Jenny notes below, the custodial experience was so removed from her reality, everyday experiences took her aback:

I was walking into shops and I was thinking, "Oh my gosh", cos I didn't see a shop [inside]. I didn't actually like... all I saw was pure girls. I didn't see like cars or food shops and that. *Jenny, 16*

### **Adapting to outside changes**

However, it is not just a case of children struggling to refamiliarise themselves with everyday elements of their lives – sometimes those elements have changed while they have been inside. And in such cases, they find a different reality from the one they left behind, and are forced to catch up with changes that others outside may be used to. This may be something very mundane in their environment, but it may destabilise them and can cause them stress. For example, Steve specifically recalls how he had to go through a process of getting used to changes in shop owners in his neighbourhood:

There's new owners in the shops and all that. It was a bit strange, but I've got used to it now. *Steve, 17*

Similarly, young people can be confused when they suddenly come across such a change. For instance, 14-year-old Barry told us of how he thought he was being robbed by his local shopkeeper when he found a foreign coin in his change. He reacted aggressively, but then discovered that the coin was a new legitimate

denomination brought into circulation while he was in custody. Again, the effect is that young people have to go through a period of reorienting themselves in learning to cope with these changes which can be particularly stressful when unexpected.

Adjusting to the outside world is likely to be more difficult for young people who have spent longer in prison, precisely because the extent of change on the outside will have been greater. Reflecting perceptively on what the transition to the community would be like for girls who were subject to longer sentences, Gemma describes how the world had moved on without them:

They're stuck in like time, because that's the time that they came into prison. I've noticed that with a lot of girls, like their dress sense, it's just like little things but I can tell when someone has come into prison because they're still stuck in the time that they came in. Whereas I just come in and I'm more updated so I know about things like Blackberries but when they went in prison Blackberries wasn't out, so it's like, they've got different views on things and that because they're stuck in the time when they went in and so when they come out I think they're gonna need a lot of help because the world's developing all the time and they're stuck in that time.... *Gemma, 17*

The problem of readjusting to the outside world can be exacerbated by the fact that many young people in conflict with the law suffer from low self-esteem (Trzesniewski et al, 2006) and withdrawal may thus reflect, in part, a lack of confidence to be seen in public. This reluctance might be compounded by some of the practicalities associated with release. As Gemma points out, clothes that may have been fashionable at the point of deprivation of liberty may no longer be so – a consideration of some importance to many young people. Similarly, the change in regime associated with incarceration can also impact on body size and shape. One of things that struck Sasha on release for instance was that:

None of my clothes fit me, I had to go out and buy new clothes. *Sasha, 17*

While Sasha was fortunate enough to have the resources that would allow her to replenish her wardrobe, she recognised that, given the correlation between those young people subject to imprisonment and deprivation (an issue that receives more attention below), many of her peers would not be in that position.

### Learning to interact again

Young people are shocked to find that the unfamiliar familiar can even include their family and friends. They report finding it difficult to interact even with those closest to them, with obvious negative implications for how they can be supported:

I didn't know what to say to mum and dad when I came out. And I didn't know what to say to my friends. I like never talked to hardly anyone. I just kept myself to myself. *Peter, 17*

As Peter experienced, knowing what to say can be difficult. There is a period of both renegotiating relationships that have been interrupted by incarceration and re-establishing common ground and experiences on which to base conversations. But this can be as difficult as it is unexpected, and as with Peter and noted in the previous section, can be a reason for withdrawal.

This lack of communication is not just difficult because incarceration interrupts a relationship, and associated support, but the interactions themselves can be stressful. Ben describes below how he became red with embarrassment when he couldn't communicate with his cousin as he would have done normally before custody:

I was in the bedroom with my cousin celebrating that I'd just come out. And usually, like me and my cousin chat away and everything but in the bedroom I was just looking and smiling and embarrassed, going all red and everything. Going all red. I didn't want to talk to them. She started talking to me and I was, "Yeah yeah". I just didn't know what to say. It is a weird experience, a really weird experience. *Ben, 17*

Although he didn't say it directly, it is possible that one of the reasons that Ben was so embarrassed was that he was communicating with a female peer – something he is unlikely to have done in his artificial custodial environment. At 17 years old, he was housed in an all-male young offender institution, where young people can spend the whole of the custodial element of their sentence, which takes place during their formative teenage years, not interacting (or learning to interact) with the opposite sex. This point is also made by Jenny who found it strange even seeing boys, let alone communicating with them:

**It was strange seeing boys walking past me. People was coming up to me "How are you?" And I weren't really relating to them. *Jenny, 16***

A subsidiary theme from young people about how stressful interacting can be after custody, relates to the fact others may be particularly interested to talk to them because they have just been released. As Jenny suggests, above, people will come up to them to ask them how they are – well-intentioned – but making the period of reorientation all the more challenging. At a time when every interaction is difficult, and every experience seems so unfamiliar that withdrawal is a natural reaction, others can unwittingly increase anxieties by forcing interactions.

Sasha provides a good example of how her family and friends increased her stress after custody when they decided to make a fuss of her. As she had spent her 18th birthday in custody, they held a gathering for her almost immediately after she came out:

**Cos everything was going too fast. Like people, all my family were coming over, get all this birthday stuff and....I dunno, like every time I see someone, it was like "Oh how was prison?" "How was this, how was that?" and yeah, it was just the same thing over and over. *Sasha, 17***

Not only did relatives keep reminding her of her time in custody, which she was trying to reorientate away from (in focus and in identity), they were unintentionally putting pressure on her to communicate and interact when she had yet to reorientate herself. Everything was too much for Sasha as the focus of their attention, which may well have contributed to the emotional breakdown described in relation to her, and others earlier. Consequently, although family and friends can offer tremendous support at this difficult time, support can be experienced as contributing to the difficulties of readjustment.

## 5 Conclusion – disorientation and reorientation

Revisiting what young people have said across a number of studies about their experiences of custody has revealed that they have to face a period of disorientation and reorientation immediately following release. This period can be stressful, with the young person trying to come to terms with their change in circumstances, readjust to their new environment, and (re)negotiate relationships. Furthermore, the challenges during this period are exacerbated because the disorientation tends not to be fully anticipated by young people – it can come as a shock, making the process even more difficult. The time periods in relation to disorientation and reorientation vary, but the young people tended to refer to the early days and weeks following release.

Understandably, the young people who go through this process can suffer negative effects, at least in the short term. They have reported feelings and experiences to us that are clearly associated with stress and anxiety, including physical symptoms and emotional breakdown after feeling overwhelmed. It is unsurprising that some young people withdraw into themselves, finding that they cannot speak or that they need to hide away from the world. There is also a theme of physical tiredness from young people on release, although it is unclear whether this in itself is a symptom of stress, or of needing to adjust to a change in pace and lifestyle outside prison.

We noted that the feelings and behaviour recounted by young people are suggestive of diagnostic symptoms of different anxieties, including panic attacks. As a whole, and in this context, it is reasonable to understand the experiences of these young people in terms of, and consistent with, the World Health Organisation's classification of *adjustment disorders* (World Health Organisation, 1992;). Worryingly, for longer-term successful resettlement and well-being generally, *adjustment disorders* in adolescence carry significant increased risks of later psychiatric illness and suicide (Casey and Bailey, 2011; Pelkonen et al, 2005).

In attempting to explain the origins of the stress that they endure on release, young people consistently refer to different forms of change that are associated with the transition from custody to community. The suddenness of that change from incarceration to freedom is in itself disorienting and scary, and can leave young people feeling lost and confused. The change of pace is also stressful, experienced by those who have been subject to the confines and sedentariness of prison life as everyone rushing about and around them. Likewise, leaving that ordered regime means that the young people need to **readjust** to lack of structure, sometimes adding to the upsetting feeling of being lost.

That disorientation can be underlined particularly by discomfort in finding that aspects of their environment and lives that were mundane and familiar now seem unfamiliar as they are encountered afresh for the first time in months or years. This **refamiliarisation** can be made even more difficult if the young person encounters anything on the outside that has actually changed during their time in custody, which perhaps takes them by surprise and leaves them feeling even more destabilised and anxious. Similarly, young people can find that once familiar associations with family and friends need to be **renegotiated** – interrupted relationships need to be rebuilt. Getting to know people again has to be negotiated against a backdrop of not being used or able to interact freely with others in the outside world, perhaps particularly with peers of the opposite sex. The observation is also made that even the most supportive families and friends can actually make matters worse, with their attentiveness and fuss putting extra pressure on the young person to perform while they are attempting to navigate a period of reorientation.

In short, then, the period immediately following custody may include the following elements of the disorientation and reorientation process:



**Table 2: Disorientation and reorientation following release from custody**

Focus of change	Disorientation problems	Reorientation process
Life regime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sudden change</li> <li>• faster pace of life</li> <li>• lack of structure</li> </ul>	Readjustment to new regime
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiar seeming unfamiliar</li> <li>• alterations while inside</li> </ul>	Refamiliarisation to environment
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uncomfortable interacting</li> <li>• interrupted relationships</li> <li>• difficulty talking to opposite sex</li> </ul>	Renegotiation of relationships and redevelopment of interaction skills

The process of reorientation can be summarised as readjusting to a new life regime, refamiliarisation with an environment experienced as alien, and renegotiation with people who have become estranged.

This necessary reorientation may be difficult enough for anyone to undertake in the circumstances, but we need to remember other factors that make it especially challenging for these children. First, children may not be as used to transitions and change (particularly positive change) as adults, and may not have developed constructive coping strategies to deal with change.

Second, young people subject to custodial sentencing typically have higher levels of need and vulnerabilities than the general population, including problems of mental ill health (Chitsabesan et al, 2006; Jacobson et al, 2010; Wright and Liddle, 2014).

Third, young people who offend seriously and persistently typically have a chaotic background (Nacro, 2004) – the contrast between the artificially highly regimented custodial experience and the disordered home environment to which they return is accordingly likely to be particularly pronounced, and the necessary reorientation correspondingly more marked than would otherwise be the case.

Fourth, the actual move from custody to the community will inevitably be accompanied by an internal process of trying to negotiate a post-custody identity – this is a period of confusion for young people about themselves as well as their environment.

And fifth, research has consistently shown that young people are destabilised further by resettlement support (sometimes promised personally to a young person) not being available or even planned by the time of release (Bateman, Hazel and Wright, 2013; Hazel et al, 2002a). Elements that are fundamental to the process of successful transition to the community – such as accommodation and educational provisions are often either left to the last minute, giving these young people a lack of opportunity to prepare or, at worst, not organised until after release.

It is not difficult to appreciate how the additional challenges faced by this group of young people in particular can combine to undermine their process of reorientation. They are likely to make the process more stressful, in turn exacerbating some of the young people's underlying problems and impeding the process of resettlement in the community and making any movement towards desistance more problematic.

Moreover, international literature recognising the problems of young people adjusting to entering prison has highlighted that the younger the prisoner the more likely they are to respond to their anxiety in a manner leading to punishment by the institution (MacKenzie, 1987). This age-related tendency might also reasonably be expected to manifest itself in the parallel process of readjustment to the community



following release, leading to stress after release highlighted in this report. It may help to explain the observed phenomenon that the early period after release is the riskiest in terms of reoffending, and that the younger the person is, the quicker they reoffend and more likely they are to be breached (Hazel, Liddle and Gordon, 2010).

The literature on young people's stresses after entering custody has also begun to consider the implications for practitioners in terms of managing the process and its effects (Gover et al, 2000; Van der Laan and Eichelsheim, 2013). In discovering that young people can suffer from similar issues when transitioning back into the community following a period of incarceration, this report inevitably raises the question of policy and practice responses in the field of resettlement. Given the prevalence of trauma on release, professionals should consider the implications for how they might support young people through their release and during the process of reorientation to living in the community. From a resettlement perspective, the findings of this report suggest that there may be merit in reconsidering the expectations on young people subject to licence conditions, the nature of appropriate intervention and what professionals can do to promote reorientation and readjustment.

Policymakers, practitioners and courts also need to reconsider the most appropriate response to a failure to comply with licence requirements, particularly in the early period after release, when young people may be struggling to cope with their period of reintegration. We know that this is also the period when young people on Detention and Training Orders tend to have more intensive licence requirements, including attending several supervision sessions in the first few days after release. Is this intensity always appropriate, and is there sufficient flexibility to adjust to the ongoing experiences of the child? Is it appropriate to begin breach proceedings or recall them to custody, or even threaten such courses of action in respect of a child who is unable to leave their home because they are suffering symptoms of anxiety associated with release from institutional confinement? This clearly has implications for justice, child well-being and longer-term desistance.

We consider that the issues highlighted in this report urgently need to be recognised and considered both nationally and locally. The recommendations outlined in the section that follows are intended to stimulate this debate and to suggest the kinds of changes that might be required to reduce children's anxieties after custody, encourage reorientation, and promote effective resettlement and longer-term desistance.

## 6 Recommendations

Meaningful engagement and work on shifting the young person towards a more constructive narrative cannot begin while they are struggling to cope with feeling lost and stressed on release from custody. Consequently, if incarceration is absolutely necessary, it is essential that policymakers and practitioners take steps to ease the transition for young people returning to the community. The young people (and the environment/supporters) need to be prepared well in advance for these post-release challenges, and appropriate support should be in place to guide them through a destabilising and stressful period in order to promote quicker and more successful longer-term resettlement.

Beyond the obvious preference to avoid sentencing or remanding young people to custody, there are some specific recommendations that would help ease this reorientation process:

### Overall

- The first step is for policymakers and service providers to acknowledge that release involves disorientation and can be stressful. Once aware, they can begin to anticipate and understand some of the likely reactions of young people, and take these into account in planning, carrying out, and enforcing a sentence.

### For the custodial phase

- Young people also need to be made aware in advance of how they may feel on release. Ideally, the young people should undergo a planned preparation for release that begins as early as possible during their custodial period, helping them to find and adopt coping mechanisms for the huge changes in their lives.
- Release on temporary licence (ROTL) or mobility, as it is known in some institutions, should be used much more widely. It is already known that if ROTL is used for visits and interviews relating to accommodation and education, training or employment it can be useful in helping offenders to prepare for resettlement. Taking the reorientation process into account would suggest that resettlement can also be aided by an increased use of ROTL to help refamiliarise (or familiarise if it is a new area) a child with their home environment. Extending the use of ROTL would also facilitate a more graduated process of readjustment; enabling young people to get used to the change of pace and the extent of change they will experience when they leave the confines of the institution over a period of time, thereby minimising the extent of the shock associated with release:

*If just for an hour, just like walking around. Barry, 14*

- Physical conditioning of the young person for life outside could help reduce tiredness and better equip them to cope with the pace of life and activities outside. Physical activities in the institution should consider the likely needs of young people on release and prepare them accordingly to combat the sudden shift from a largely sedentary regime.
- Renegotiating relationships and interactions with those closest to them could be aided by focusing more on family interactions while inside. Although made more difficult by custodial institutions increasingly being a considerable distance from home (Bateman, Hazel and Wright, 2013), regular communication with as many family and friends as possible should be encouraged. Such contact should not be restricted in any way as part of a behavioural management scheme or as a disciplinary sanction.
- Providers of resettlement services should ensure that they assist parents and other family and friends to visit the young person regularly when inside, if the young person wishes it. Institutions should consider how they can facilitate more alone time between young people and their families before release in order to help start the renegotiation process.

- This report reaffirms the importance of early planning for release, beginning as soon as the custodial period starts and with early confirmation of the resettlement arrangements that will be in place when the young person leaves the institution. This is not only so that interventions are able to start promptly on release (see below), but also so that the young person has an opportunity to prepare themselves for where they are likely to be living and what they are likely to be doing when they leave.

### For the release phase

- All young people should be met at the institution at the time of release by someone that they are familiar with and trust. If family or friends are not available or suitable, then any service provider picking up the child must be well known to them and trusted. If this relationship has not been developed before custody, particular attention should be paid to ensuring that the rapport and trust is built up during the custodial phase – which will mean more regular contact than sentence planning meetings.
- Consideration should be given to what practical support can be put in place that might minimise the trauma of transition. On occasion this will require making available additional resources to allow young people to buy new clothes or other things that will make them feel less uncomfortable in what has become an unfamiliar environment.
- A structured timetable should be put in place for the initial period after release. This should bear in mind the stressful symptoms of disorientation, including withdrawal, so should be flexible and adaptable to the individual. Moreover, the timetable should not place unreasonable expectations on young people, recognising that intensive activity immediately on release from incarceration might simply increase the trauma associated with the transition to the community. Intervention should accordingly be planned in a graduated manner, increasing what is expected of young people according to how quickly and successfully they are able to readjust to life outside of prison.
- Service providers should consider activities during the initial period after release that specifically aid the reorientation process. These may help readjustment by, for instance, facilitating families and young people to have more structure to their timetable or lifestyle than they are used to. Service providers may help with refamiliarisation by perhaps mentoring them into their surrounding environment in a controlled and supported way, with appropriate briefing and debriefing. They may help renegotiation of relationships by perhaps facilitating sessions and scenarios with family and friends, and guiding interaction in a positive way.

The *Beyond Youth Custody* team is currently conducting further work looking at this issue and is hoping to expand on this list of recommendations. Research is being undertaken with practitioners and young people themselves to develop practical ideas for interventions to aid the reorientation process that may pave the way for better engagement between young people and resettlement services.

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This review has been produced by the Beyond Youth Custody partnership, consisting of Nacro, ARCS (UK) Ltd, The Centre for Social Research at the University of Salford, and the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime at the University of Bedfordshire.

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